

Writ 1301

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### A Cohrs Paper

My pencil slowly rolls down the desk towards my lap. It cannot stay still because of the shaking. I stop bouncing my knee up and down and catch it before it drops. The classroom is quiet except for a few whispers and the tick of the clock. Class started ten minutes ago. My teacher walks slowly from student to student, dropping graded papers face down. I scan the room and see a few smiles, but mostly shoulders dropping in disappointment. The higher scorers ask others what grade they received while the underachievers stuff their papers into their backpacks. After what feels like an eternity, my paper lands in front of me. As he walks away, Mr. Cohrs whispers, "Good work" under his breath. I brace myself and flip the paper over. In green ink, a big 30/30 stares at me from the upper right hand corner. Underneath it, in sloppy cursive, is the word "excellent." My very first A. The first essay that year to receive 100% on a "Cohrs Paper." I try my best to conceal my excitement. I look up and see him back behind his podium at the front of the room. He has a new stack of papers in his hand. He announces that he has selected one anonymous paper that we are all going to read together. As he passes the copies down the rows of desks, he explains that this is what an A paper looks like. I read the opening sentence and my heart stops. It is my essay.

Northfield High School is the home of the Raiders. It says it on the sign as you drive by - not that it needs to. It is obvious enough. Athletic fields surround the building on the outside and the Raider colors, maroon and gold, swallow the inside. It is a school dedicated to sports. As a student with no athletic ability whatsoever, I sometimes found it

difficult to fit in. Not only was I bad at sports, but somehow all of my friends were amazing at them. Some of them were natural athletes, some were raised by parents who valued athletics, and some of them were passionate enough to practice during the off-season. Unfortunately, I fell into the category of, “D. None of the above.” I had fun participating in athletic activities and enjoyed being a spectator at the sports I was not involved in. But, as I got older, I found myself less interested. Unfortunately, I did not have many non-athletically gifted peers with which to relate. I needed a space where I could grow and discover different talents I possessed. Luckily, through the support and assistance of a brilliant English teacher, I found, within myself, a new talent for writing.

One of the main reasons that I was not a successful athlete is because of my non-athletic family. Both of my parents are Media Specialists at public schools. They have always taught me to value education first and extracurriculars second. That’s not to say that they didn’t support me in any and all activities in which I participated. However, they believed that I would go further in life if I worked hard at academics because sports were temporary. While most of my athletically gifted friends practiced on the weekends with their parents or learned strategic moves from their older siblings, my family bonded over other activities. As a librarian, my mom loves to read. She is always willing to spend money on books for me. My dad’s hobby is music. He has been involved in multiple bands, owns countless guitars, and loves going to concerts. Because of them, I am an avid reader and a music-lover - not an athlete.

Even though I knew I was interested in hobbies that differed from my friends’, I still tried my best to be an athlete in order to fit in. The only natural talent I had was my height. Beginning in elementary school, I shot up like a tree and towered over all of my

friends. For this reason, in third grade I decided to join volleyball. My teacher was the coach. By the end of the first week, my wrists were so red and bruised that I begged my mom to let me quit. In fifth grade, I decided to start basketball. I hoped that my height would work in my favor for this sport. Though I stuck it out for all of middle school and had fun making new friends, I never moved up to the better team. I hardly ever scored (once, in basketball, I did, in the wrong basket) or was of value to the coach or my teammates. This was true for soccer and tennis, which I also participated in through eighth grade.

I remember sitting on the sidelines during those hot, sweaty summers of soccer better than I can remember actually playing on the field. The grass on my thighs would annoy me and half of my water would be gone from the heat of the sun before I even had a chance get out on the field. My coach would encourage me and a couple of the other girls to cheer on our teammates who were actually standing vertical and moving their legs. “Your enthusiasm and support is just as important as being out there,” she told us. I didn’t really believe her.

In the spring of eighth grade, I decided to try my hand at softball. My dad imagined me playing first base, with my long arm reaching into the air to catch balls. “You’re going to do great!” he said. “You’ll be just like me out there!” he said. As it turned out, my swing was uncoordinated and I had trouble catching the balls thrown at me by the better players. Though I made lasting friendships and great memories on the many teams I joined, I always felt a little unneeded. I was always the player with the best attitude and spirit, but the one that no one actually wanted to see on the field or court.

Though I never gave up on sports completely, I slowly began to gain interest in other things. One summer day, my sister invited me to go to the pool with her and the two young boys she nannied. I was lying on my bedroom floor reading a great book by Jodi Picoult. I rolled over and looked up at her in my doorway. “No thanks” I responded, “I think I want to stay here and finish this chapter.” I loved the way Picoult kept me hungry for her words. She used such compelling language and her characters were so well developed. I felt like I knew each and everyone of them. All of her books made me both laugh and cry.

In April of my eighth grade year, two English teachers from the high school visited the middle school. Anyone in my grade, who was interested in taking “Advanced English Classes” in the next four years, was excused from class and welcomed down to the auditorium. I was the only one of my close friends who wanted to go.

“What’s the point?” Cassie asked. (Future captain of the hockey team.)

“That sounds way too hard.” Sarah replied. (Future captain of the soccer team.)

So, I attended the meeting by myself. There was a big group of us all sitting nervously in the comfy seats. I recognized most of the students, but did not know them on a personal level. Actually, some of them were kids I had been friends with early on in elementary school, but we grew apart once I tried my hand at sports. Sara, Mari, Hannah, and Allie were all incredibly kind girls who I always knew would grow up to be brilliant.

We all sat silently as a woman and a man walked in. They introduced themselves as Mrs. Mucha and Mr. Cohrs. The woman wore heels that clicked loudly as she walked down the steps towards the stage. Mr. Cohrs was a very intimidating man. He stood alongside Mrs. Mucha at the front, looming over us like a skyscraper blocking the

sunlight. His shaved head reminded me of a drill sergeant and his goatee made him look sharp. I eyed him up and down. He wore a soccer jersey from a different country, khaki shorts, and Crocs. *How could such a scary man wear Crocs?* I thought.

They talked to us about the “Advanced Track” of the English classes we had the option of taking in high school. The classes went Advanced English Nine, Advanced American Literature, Advanced British Literature, and finally A.P. English. The two teachers explained how valuable these classes could be for us. They expressed that the things we would be taught would prepare us for college and greatly benefit us in the future. I liked the idea of being involved in something that challenged me, other than a sport. We were given applications to turn in by the following week. Similarly to athletic tryouts before the season, we had to prove ourselves worthy enough to be in the advanced program. My parents helped me fill mine out and I was accepted. This was the first class I signed up for as a freshman in high school.

On my first day as a high schooler, I was very nervous. I did not understand the layout or know where any of my classes were located. The school seemed huge and spread out. The first thing I noticed when I walked in the front doors, was how much Raider Pride the school seemed to contain. There was so much maroon and gold that it made me dizzy. Hand-made posters hung on every open wall space. They were big and shouted, “Welcome, Class of 2013!” The cafeteria walls were covered with maroon and gold handprints of students passed - a senior class tradition. Instead of feeling inviting, I felt as though the hands were reaching for me, consuming me. In the hallways, every football player was wearing his home jersey. Lucky, upperclassmen girls were wearing boys’ away jerseys. Everyone looked so much older and confident. I stared down at the

small, printed out map that I had brought along. I had hoped to walk to classes with some of my friends, but most of them knew older students through athletic teams. They walked with them.

My first class that day was Advanced English 9 with Mr. Cohrs. Walking into the classroom, the first thing I notice is the painted words on each wall. To my left is the entire quote of “Out, out brief candle!” from Macbeth. I turn to the right and see a sentence explaining how to form the perfect thesis. Hannah and Allie wave me over. “Are you guys nervous?” I ask. “So nervous! I hear he’s really harsh.” Hannah responds. I hear footsteps behind me and quickly grab a seat next to Allie. My head whips around and in walks Cohrs. He looks the exact same as the day I first saw him in the auditorium.

He had a presence and way about him that made me afraid to speak, yet beg for his praise. However, as the weeks went by, his intimidations faded. He became my favorite teacher because of all the things I learned from him. He taught me how to think critically about everything we read. I learned about foreshadowing and an overwhelming amount of Christ figure symbolism. My favorite part was when he read to us out loud. As an experienced English teacher, he knew exactly when to pause and when to read quickly.

I also admired Cohrs because he made me feel as though everything I said was insightful. On days when I mustered the courage to raise my hand and give an answer, he didn’t shoot me down. In the past, I have experienced many teachers who simply reiterate what I have to say in their own words. They twist my ideas and make them their own. They ask for little creativity and imagination from their students and instead shove their own ideas down our throats. Mr. Cohrs was different. He would pass me later that day in

the hall and called out, “Ivy, that was a great point you made today in class!” Most days, he allowed us to argue the entire hour over one simple sentence in our reading. Cohrs rarely stood in front of us to lead the conversation. Instead, he sat on the windowsill in the back of the room as if he were a student himself. Eventually, he stopped calling on people because we were all eager to share our opinions.

This is not to say that I found his class easy. It was nearly impossible to get 100% on a paper that he assigned. He had very strict rules for his papers that students had to follow: a strong, concise, and argumentative thesis statement, no clichés, no using “I” or “we”, no using the words “very” or “huge. Paragraphs could not all be the same length, and we had to use a quote within the sentence so that, when read aloud, it flowed nicely. If any of these rules were broken more than three times, he would stop reading the paper and throw it away altogether. One last rule that Cohrs had was for himself. He never wrote compliments on our graded papers. He did not find it necessary. However, to cushion the blow, he wrote in green ink instead of red. I really appreciated that.

I decided to make it my goal that year to get 100% on one of his papers. It was the most difficult class I had, but I was determined. I wanted to prove to myself that I did not need sports because I had found my own true passion.

It took a long time for me to earn my perfect A, but it was worth it. I remember that the paper was about a short story we had read in class. My essay was about the foreshadowing that the author used. I made sure to provide many examples from the text. I visited Mr. Cohrs twice outside of class to ask him questions regarding the story and I made both of my parents edit the final result.

Receiving a 30/30 on that paper was one of the greatest accomplishments of my life. I could not have done it without the help of Mr. Cohrs. Everything he taught me about words and sentences and literary meanings are what have made me the writer I am today. I have never felt more proud of myself than when everyone in that class had the chance to read my work. I tried even harder on the next paper we were assigned and received a second 30/30. I was told I was the first student to ever do that in a row. Cohrs taught me everything I know about creating an academic paper. In a high school where amazing athletic abilities were the norm, he helped me find my own talent.